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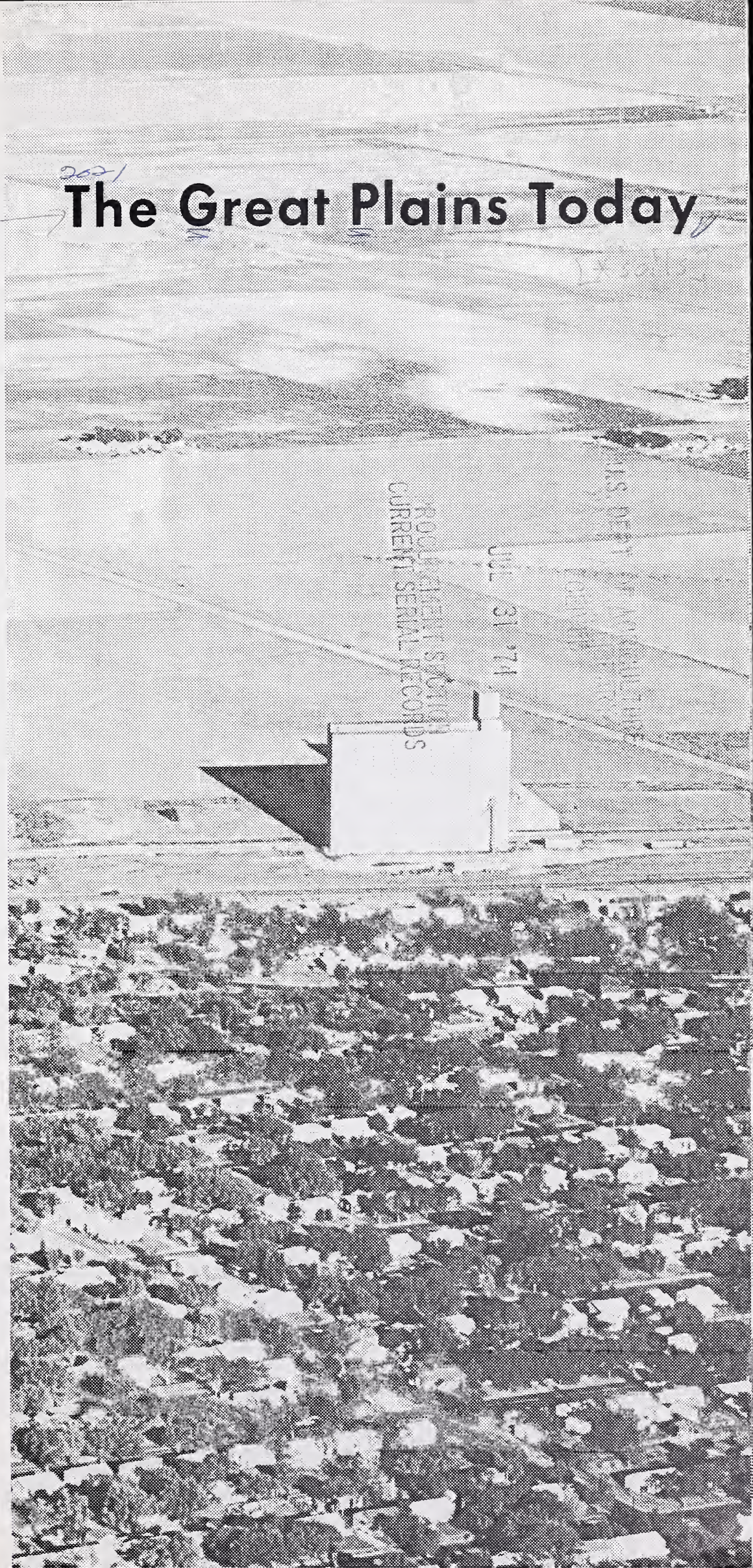
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²⁰⁶¹
Four
Decades
Past

the Dust Bowl:

²⁰²¹
The Great Plains Today



ROCKWELL SPOT
CURRENT SERIAL RECORDS

JUL 31 '74

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November 1973

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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"...they just thought it was a dry year."



When the Secretary of Agriculture speaks of America's cropland reserves, he is including acreage throughout the ten Great Plains states. The Great Plains produce much of the food and fiber that makes the United States a first rank agricultural nation. But the Plains are fragile, subject to severe wind erosion and other degradations when they are exploited or when drouth strikes. The Great Plains Conservation Program, initiated by Congress in 1956, is an important effort to protect this land's agricultural potential and minimize erosion hazards on the Plains. It provides technical assistance and cost sharing to farmers and ranchers to maintain long range improvements on the land.

Stretching north through eastern Montana and the Dakotas, south into Texas and eastern New Mexico, the Great Plains is a vast belt of grassland running through the middle of the Nation. Much of it is gently rolling hills; much of it is fertile soil; all of it is dry.

Pioneer settlers in the Great Plains never envisioned the intimacy with drouth they established through their choice of location. What each newcomer assumed to be a dry year would stretch into what seemed eternity. Unaided by modern sampling, communication, and record-keeping techniques, these hardy migrants had no way of knowing that the average rainfall in the area they had picked as home was far less than they were accustomed to. In some parts of the Plains, annual rainfall averages less than 20 inches a year.

This basic lack of water places harsh constraints on Plains dwellers which the new settlers did not understand. The Indian lived within these restrictions for generations in a delicate balance of nature where buffalo grazed, grass survived, and the soil stayed put. But the newcomers unknowingly upset this balance; the grass gave way to brush, the soil tore loose from the earth, and the term "Dust Bowl" was coined to describe a scorching blight on the land.

Experience proved to be a good teacher, but the road back was slow. "You can't imagine what the sand looked like before we tied it down," a long-time resident reported. But gradually, through good agricultural practices, the sand blows retreated and more and more acres again became suitable for planned cultivation and grazing.

Nothing, however, could change the harsh, erratic climate typical of the Plains.

Here are scenes from the Great Plains today where you can see urban areas surrounded and supported by a mammoth and diverse agriculture that blossoms in a semi-arid climate—scenes which focus on some efforts which helped achieve the present-day miracle on the land, and that hopefully will preserve it.

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ON THE COVER: Town and country meet abruptly on the Great Plains, as here on the outskirts of Amarillo, Texas. Vast agricultural lands play heavily in the economy of Great Plains cities (0872W1121-8). PATTERNS IN CRACKED SOIL present a kind of graphic beauty, but they bespeak a fundamental problem in the way water is distributed on the Plains. Much of the scarce rainfall occurs as abrupt cloudbursts, dumping water faster than it can be absorbed. This water, particularly

in the southern portion of the Plains, collects into shallow depressions, called playas, where much of it is lost through evaporation leaving only cracked beds to await the next deluge. Ways to capture and use this rainfall more effectively are being found. (0872W1096-22). A LONE TRACTOR disks stubble from the previous crop on a sprawling field on the Texas high plains. Plowing has largely replaced burning as the major method of getting rid of crop residue. Burning

pollutes the air, breaks up the soil, and helps organic matter decay. (0872W1096-22). A PLAINS FARMER echoes the sentiments of his predecessors as he scans the skies for rain. (0872W1096-22). A PLAINS FARMER echoes the sentiments of his predecessors as he scans the skies for rain. (0872W1096-22).

adds nothing to the soil. Plowed-in stubble helps break up the soil, preserves moisture, and adds organic matter. (0872W1096-22). A PLAINS FARMER echoes the sentiments of his predecessors as he scans the skies for rain. (0872W1096-22). A PLAINS FARMER echoes the sentiments of his predecessors as he scans the skies for rain. (0872W1096-22).



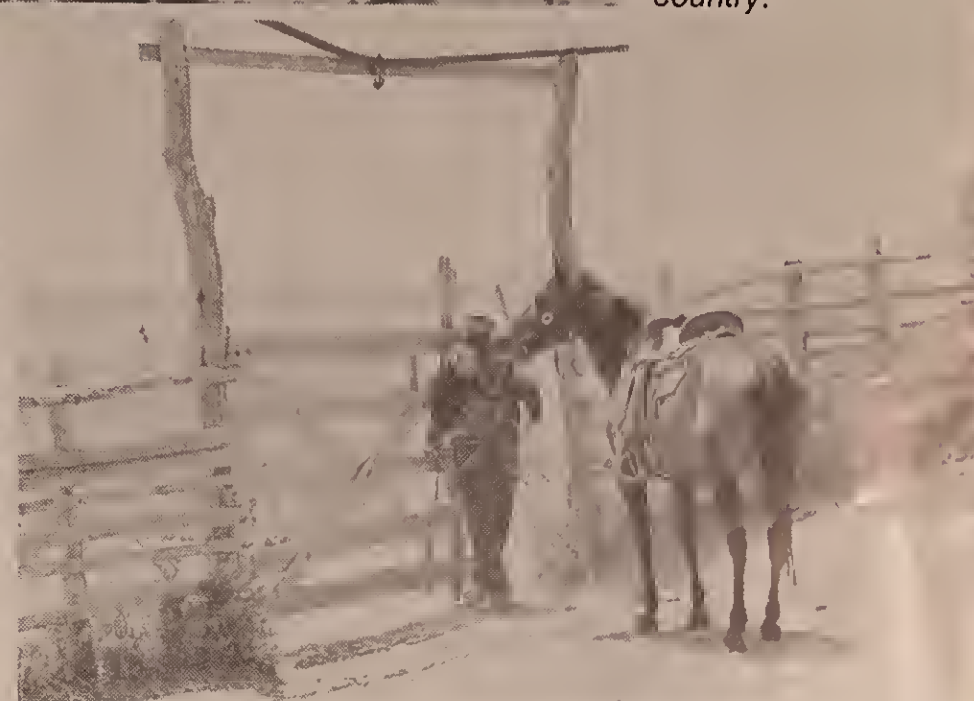
“We do this work if we don't get rain we've just blowed it.”

HUGE CATTLE FEEDLOTS dot the Plains, provide some of the best beef in the world, and also create pollution problems from runoff and solid waste disposal. Man-made ponds are one approach to preventing feedlot runoff from entering the water supply. Research is underway to find ways to make manure, now too saline and too costly to transport, a more attractive alternative to chemical fertilizers. (0872W1120-15) A FENCE separates good and bad range in an area which gets less than 20 inches of rain a year. Grass to the right is thick, protects the soil, and provides grazing. Range on the left, a victim of overgrazing, may not recover. The sparse grass has to compete with brush for moisture; the soil may blow or wash. The Great Plains Conservation Program helps reestablish range and prevent the recurrence of situations like this. (0872W1119-23)



"Water is the best fertilizer there is in this semi-arid country."

MACHINE AND HORSE are both very much a part of Plains agriculture. Huge tractor-mounted rigs, some capable of spanning twelve rows at a crack, are used to cultivate the long rows of crops, as in this cotton operation near Lubbock, Texas (0872W1098-4) but the cowboy and his mount are still very much to be seen on rolling grasslands where many acres are required to sustain one cow. Pictured is Herb Milburn leaving a corral to ride herd for a group of farmers who lease grazing rights on the Cimarron National Grasslands near Elkhart, Kansas. (0872W1113-15). IRRIGATION plays a vital role because, as one farmer put it, "Water is the best fertilizer there is in this semi-arid country." But the water table is dropping in many areas, such as in the Texas high plains where this circular sprinkler system is in operation, and both private and public resources are working toward more efficient use of water in agriculture on the Great Plains. (0872W1119-23)



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